

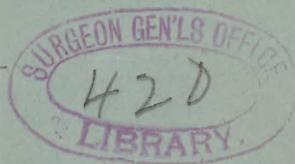
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HYPNOTISM IN A RELIGIOUS MEETING.

BY

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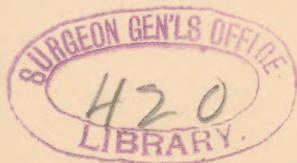
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IN a large tent in St. Louis, capable of holding 3000 or 4000 people, most extraordinary "religious meetings" have recently been held. These so-called "revival meetings" were led by one Maria B. Woodworth, who is, in my opinion, a paranoic of a strongly religious type.

The writer's attention was called to the subject by several of his patients, who averred that Mrs. Woodworth was a prophetess sent directly from Heaven, and that people were so impressed with her preaching that they were prostrated to the ground, and that while in this condition many had visions of heaven, angels, etc.

Together with Dr. Wellington Adams, I attended some of the meetings and found the statement to be correct that "people were prostrated to the ground," and I doubt not many had visions such as they describe. The meetings, for a time, increased in size, while the number hypnotized each evening increased proportionately. One evening the crowd in the tent was estimated at 5000 (many standing) while, it is said, nearly an equal number were turned away for want of room.



The beginning of the meeting is principally occupied by Mrs. Woodworth, who speaks to the audience. The address, for the most part, is an incoherent, unintelligible jargon, but occasionally a few sentences can be understood. The latter usually have to do with the supernatural occurrences related in the Bible, such as the Transfiguration, the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles, or the miracles. Perhaps her favorite themes are the visions, especially those related in the Book of Revelations. She frequently interrupted herself (if such a discourse can be said to be interrupted) to tell of visions which she herself has had, or to describe one of the very many "cures" of physical ailments which have been effected by the "power" manifested in her meetings. Her address is usually very long and I noted that she never became excited nor did she have any tendency to "shout," or unduly elevate her voice, as is so common in the ordinary revival meeting. On the contrary, there was a quiet confidence expressed in her manner which was very suggestive of the delusional, self-conceited paranoic, strong in her own beliefs.

Toward the end of her discourse she begins to exhort her hearers to "Look up to the Lord"—"Hold up your hands"—"Have faith." Her followers obey her injunctions literally; they fix their eyes steadfastly on the electric lights high above them, or on the intricate mass of converging tent-ropes beyond. In this position a few of the more susceptible of her believers succumb. They go into the first or cataleptic stage of hypnotism while the exhorter is relating from the Bible or from her own

experience the visions of heaven. A hymn then follows which is of a peculiar, monotonous character and well adapted to assist in promoting the hypnotic condition in many who are slightly or not at all influenced by the visual impressions alone. The hymn is usually repeated a number of times. During the singing, Mrs. Woodworth and her assistants (of which there are several) walk up and down the long platform encouraging those who are nervous, uneasy, or in any way visibly affected, to "hold up their hands, look up, and think of the Lord." The greatest number succumb during the singing.

As may be expected, more women than men are affected. At one large meeting the number more or less hypnotized must have been fully one hundred. Some were typical cases, exhibiting the three stages of hypnosis, namely, catalepsy, lethargy, and artificial somnambulism. When laid upon their backs on the platform, where the subjects were brought as rapidly as they became affected, those representing the typical condition lay with the eyes wide open, pupils dilated, and with a vacant or fixed stare; the arms unsupported extended upward and outward. One young woman whom I watched closely did not wink or move her eyeballs during the ten or fifteen minutes that I observed her. I attempted to place my finger upon her eyeball but was, in sharp terms, forbidden to do so by the attendant at her side. Many were more or less affected while on their feet; others while observing the directions of the leaders entirely failed in the consummation of their purpose.

A particularly shocking feature of the meetings

was the hypnosis of children, of whom several were usually affected.

The force of example must have a strong influence with many. In Charcot's clinic the subjects for hypnosis are several times shown others in the hypnotic condition before any attempt is made to hypnotize them. This preparation causes a mental impression which makes the subsequent actual attempts at hypnosis more generally successful and with fewer trials. Now most of Mrs. Woodworth's subjects have precisely this preparation; *i. e.*, they attend a number of meetings, become mentally impressed, and at subsequent meetings succumb with ease.

The question as to whether Mrs. Woodworth is an impostor or a case of religious insanity naturally arises. Judging from the meetings, from her autobiography, and more especially from an interview that I had with her, I am strongly of the latter opinion.

She states that she was born in 1845, in a small town in Ohio, but soon removed to Salem, in the same state. She denies inherited mental taint, but says that her husband was mentally unsound at one time. Four out of five of her offsprings died in childhood—one of "scrofula," another of some lingering malady.

She states that she never knew what the "power" was—never witnessed it until she had been engaged in evangelistic work for two years. When a child of thirteen she knew that the Lord had ordained her to go out and preach the gospel, and she became converted, but she fought against God. One day

while sitting alone in her room she saw the vision of the Bible on the wall. The letters were raised and the book shone as brightly as the sun. This call to preach was an audible call, heard with her ears just as she hears anyone's voice now. After this she had many visions. At first the voice of God frightened her very much, but in time she became accustomed to it. The idea of going out to preach was so repugnant to her—because a woman—that she seriously contemplated suicide. A vision of the devil, who came and tempted her, also exerted a depressing effect upon her. Her lack of education, she also felt, was a serious obstacle. During this time of struggle and indecision the Lord came and persuaded her to go. She saw a bright light, too, and angels flying all around her.

She married at an early age. After marriage the struggle continued, and the devil came to tempt her, but the Lord told her that she must go out and preach or lose her soul. In this particular vision the Saviour was on the cross; his face was so bright that she could not see it distinctly. There was a crown of thorns at His feet. This vision occurred when she was at the age of thirty-four. She told the Lord of the difficulties which she felt were in her way—lack of education, etc., when the Lord gave her power to preach just as he had given it to the Galilean fisherman. She then began her work. During the first few years of her preaching no one was stricken down in the meetings, and she was frightened when she first saw the people fall down. In this extremity the Lord came to her again and said: "Sister, don't you remember the vision of the

grain?" This vision she had beheld some time before, and was as follows: One day angels came into her room—"a whole flock of them." They carried her up and into the West, miles and miles away, over prairies and forests, and lakes and rivers. Then they stopped, resting in the air on their wings, and she saw a long, wide field of waving grain. She then began to preach, and saw the grain fall into sheaves. This she compares to Ezekiel's vision. Christ then came to her and said: "Be not afraid, that is the way you'll do when you preach to real people."

At present she seldom has visions except when "under the power," but frequently hears voices while sitting in her room, or while in bed, and she often converses aloud with the Deity. Her assistant or attendant states that she frequently finds Mrs. Woodworth standing in her room with fixed gaze and wholly immobile.

One evening during the progress of the meeting, Mrs. Woodworth herself became apparently unconscious, the condition coming on very gradually. But the phenomena in her case presented a marked contrast to those of her hypnotized followers. Instead of the expressionless, cataleptoid state common in them, the leader's appearance was that of great exhilaration—ecstasy. The face assumed a peculiar, radiant expression; the eyes became fixed, while the body remained immobile in a dramatic position. Her condition at that time was described as pure ecstasy. Her appearance was so striking, so supernatural that it would have impressed anyone. It is not a matter of surprise that the more susceptible of her followers are able to see at such times an actual

halo of light about their leader's head. She may possibly at other times have attacks of catalepsy or hystero-epilepsy, but this I was unable to determine. Mills¹ states that the three conditions are commonly associated in the same individual.

The woman, I believe, is a case of *religious monomania* (paranoia). Her early struggles; her visions of hell and heaven; her strong temptation at one time to commit suicide; the nature, character, and evolution of her delusions, transforming the ignorant country girl into the undaunted, direct agent of the Deity—all confirm this theory. The two prominent characteristics of paranoia, namely, personal egotism and a feeling of persecution, are prominent features in the character of Maria B. Woodworth.

History is full of examples of religious characters such as hers. Spitzka² says:

“More than one insane fanatic of the middle ages has been responsible for the fierce campaigns waged against dissenters and alleged infidels, and not one of the least remarkable incidents of this period of history is the fact that for two centuries Europe poured out its best strength in the Crusades, under the influence of the prayers, sermons, and visions of a Peter the Hermit, who undoubtedly suffered from this form of monomania.”

Mills³ describes a number of historical characters who, at times, would pass into the condition of ecstasy. Both Elizabeth of Hungary and Joan of Arc were cataleptics and ecstasies.

Gibbon's⁴ description of the state of ecstasy as it

¹ Pepper's System of Medicine, vol. v. p. 339.

² Manual of Insanity, p. 318.

³ Pepper's System, vol. v. p. 340.

⁴ Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, vol. vii. p. 64.

occurred in the monks of the Oriental Church is classical.

The visions of Swedenborg and John Englebrecht were conceived during the ecstatic trance.

A notable case is that of Bernadette Soubirons, who, near a mountain stream of the Pyrenees, saw in the niche of a rock a female figure of great splendor, with an aureola about her head ; her body also being very bright. She saw this vision a number of times, and believed it to be the Virgin Mary. The place has been made a shrine, and is visited by persons of all nationalities.

Cataleptic, ecstatic, hysterical, and allied manifestations in religious gatherings might be recounted at great length, but a few notable historical occurrences must suffice. The Buddhist fasts to render his body weak. He then fixes his eyes and thoughts intently on a single object, when he easily brings himself into the trance condition.

Often wonderful visions appear to subjects in the cataleptic state, and these are described to others.

The "dancing mania" occurred in 1374, principally in France and Germany. It is said that persons affected were unconscious, and insensible to pain, and that many beheld celestial visions. This epidemic was very widespread, the presence of one affected person being sufficient to excite the disease in a large crowd.

In the famous Kentucky revival of 1810 scores were prostrated at a single meeting. Some became cataleptic ; others became possessed of a sort of

“dancing mania” or “jerks.” This latter manifestation was most remarkable. The body would sway violently forward and backward, the arms and hands striking out in any or all directions. The slave and his master, the delicate woman and the rugged backwoodsman, the preacher and his hearer, were alike affected.

The “jerks” appeared in Ireland about the year 1859, during the progress of a very remarkable religious movement. The manifestations were very similar to those of the famous Kentucky revival. Visions of various kinds were common, and thousands of persons were affected. An interesting feature noticed in many of the subjects was the appearance of stigmata on the hands or feet. For a description of those curious phenomena the reader is referred to the admirable articles of Hammond,¹ Clymer, and Mills.²

The reader of history—secular, medical, and religious—will find many more examples similar to those briefly referred to here.

These movements, or “jerks,” of course, chiefly affect the neuropathic and hysterical or those predisposed to such conditions. Becoming more extensive the epidemic affects persons who are healthy, or at least who have enough mental and nervous stability to carry them through life, under ordinary circumstances, without abnormal manifestations of the nervous system.

¹ On Certain Conditions of Nervous Derangement. New York, 1881.

² Pepper's System, vol. v. p. 348.

Working upon religious feeling—the strongest in the human mind—is it to be wondered at that enthusiasts and religious monomaniacs have with their pseudo-religious fervor wrought such woful harm in the past? Who can estimate ultimate results in the way of hereditary transmission of nervous instability?

Laws governing the practice of hypnotism are now in force in Belgium, France, and Russia, and the writer hopes that efficient laws will soon be enacted in this country. An attempt on the part of Dr. Wellington Adams and myself to abolish the Woodworth meetings in St. Louis was futile, as there is no law by which that end could be attained. The cry may be raised by the unsophisticated and the ignorant that to forbid the Woodworth meetings would be a menace to religious liberty. To those we can answer that the law would not or should not permit the habitual use in religious exercises of agents, such as ether, chloroform, or opium, which will cause a person to lose consciousness. Neither should the use of a more subtle agent, such as hypnotism, be permitted. All these are universally recognized by physicians as exceedingly harmful in their effects when used habitually and indiscriminately, and by ignorant and unauthorized persons.

It should always be remembered that it is a serious matter to cause any person to lose his very *Ego*—through whatever agency.

The enlightenment of our age, and the scientific basis upon which hypnotism is beginning to rest,

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lead us to hope and believe that hypnotism as a factor in the hands of religious fanatics can never in the future do as much harm as it has done in the past.

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